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Michael Jackson's *Ressentiment*: *Billie Jean* and *Smooth Criminal* in Conversation with Fred Astaire

Amir Khan

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Little attempt is made at juxtaposing Michael Jackson's art against that of his cultural predecessors. Reading Billie Jean *(1983) and* Smooth Criminal *(1988) in conversation with Fred Astaire's popular 1953 musical,* The Band Wagon*, for example, exposes all sorts of intertwining threads of significance and* ressentiment*, particularly in terms of race relations and cultural appropriation. Yet my purpose in this paper is not to assign the last word to either Michael Jackson or Fred Astaire, but to analyze what sort of ramifications their dialogue may have for American popular imagination.*

If we grant it possible that at least *one* of Michael Jackson's music videos drew some manner of inspiration from at least *one* of Fred Astaire's musical comedies, the next step would be to lay out or prove, more convincingly, that the nature of the connection between the two is more than superficial. Ultimately, I want to say that Michael Jackson's 1988 music video, *Smooth Criminal*, can be read in conversation with Fred Astaire's 1953 musical, *The Band Wagon*, and, further, that Jackson's response is an angry one characterized not by hostility *per se* but by something Nietzsche might identify as *ressentiment*. My afforded intuition, that Jackson is indeed angry (or resentful) then requires suitable tuitions. Providing the reader with such tuitions is what I seek to do here. My first clue in reading anger into Jackson's "persona" (i.e. his art *and* life) comes from Margo Jefferson, who uses anger as a point of departure to discuss Jackson's legacy. From there, a brief consideration of anger and Nietzschean *ressentiment* in terms of American race relations and "lynching" before situating, conceptually, such anger on a cultural "scene"—with Jackson at the center of popular imagination and his fans on the periphery. Finally, a consideration of Fred Astaire and how Jackson's anger can be read in response to an opening dance sequence in *The Band Wagon*.

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Michael Jackson's *Ressentiment*

Margo Jefferson, in her admirable study of the man entitled *On Michael Jackson*, raises the possibility of Jackson as angry. In so doing, she effectively strays from standard victimary critiques that work rather cynically to commercialize our sympathies and rebrand Jackson not as a cultural master, but as either (1) something much less formidable (like a deeply misunderstood boy wonder) or (2) someone deserving of criminal persecution.[1] In both scenarios, Jackson is guilty—that is *victimized*. Standard victimary critiques are unhelpful in assessing Jackson's cultural legacy.[2] Where Jackson's "guilt" is assumed a priori, he earns either our sympathy or scorn. In the latter case, our scorn is necessary for doling out "appropriate" *criminal* punishment. In the former, where Jackson is allotted compassion for a missed childhood, the enormity of his cultural achievement is downplayed, as though (his) genius necessarily entails misunderstanding.

Obviously misunderstanding breeds anger and resentment; but the nature of the misunderstanding, with anger as *cause* rather than effect, is more presciently touched on here by Jefferson:

> Celebrity demands a certain degree of hypocrisy from all performers. The persona can't possibly square with the private life. But it's much freakier for kids. Some of their fans are old enough to be their parents or grandparents . . . .
>
> We've all heard the explanations for why Michael is at ease only when he is with children. His reasons make a kind of psychological sense. Children are open and unpredictable. Children are creative and playful. Children are true innocents. Children give joy and want joy in return. Children ask nothing of you but love and protection. You can capture your lost childhood in the company of children.
>
> Michael never admits that he is *angry* as well as lonely and sad. And yet, what better reproach to all grown-ups—family, siblings, fans—than to have nothing to do with them except as businesspeople you can hire and fire. Or as wives you can marry and divorce. Or as surrogate mothers you can pay and dismiss. (Jefferson 76–77, emphasis added)

Here Jackson's resentment arises out of disappointment and horror at the behavior of those he is supposed to trust, i.e. "businesspeople," or grown-ups.[3] Jackson's father, an instrumental force in his son's success, is also a pertinent point of departure in assessing Michael Jackson's anger, even if Joseph Jackson's worth to his son's life requires negotiation. I do not plan to go into such negotiation here except to note that even if Michael Jackson was unwilling to carry out such negotiation (i.e. between acknowledgement of, and aversion to, his father) in life, certainly others are willing to do so as some measure of critical engagement with Michael Jackson.

I do not mean that all such critical measures are insincere or unfruitful, only that the bulk of such discussion is taken up as a means of avoiding an issue that does not originate in Jackson's biography alone. If Jackson has reason to be angry, the salient cultural forces worth analyzing may lie beyond his immediate life story. Jackson's anger might make more sense against a backdrop of black-white relations in America

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where Jackson acts as a cultural lightning rod—as though cultural negotiations are happening through him. Moreover, if we consider how Stanley Cavell reads Fred Astaire—that is, as precisely the sort of lightning rod mentioned above—and if we are ready to accept that *Smooth Criminal* is a sincere cultural response to the film in question (*The Band Wagon*), we can begin to sketch out more meaningfully some of the cultural resentments and negotiations at work between the two while avoiding the pitfalls of an easy victimary narrative of Jackson on the one hand, or the rash and hasty persecution of him on the other.

Before getting to Cavell's analysis of Astaire, let us distinguish between two types of guilt in the context of American race-relations—more specifically, in regards to *lynching*. Though I am talking about Jackson's achievements and shortcomings against an American cultural narrative that cannot afford to ignore issues of race, I am less emphatically suggesting that Jackson's brutal treatment at the hands of an American mass media is merely an extension, or a postmodern example, of the "traditional" nineteenth-century phenomenon. Certainly forces accentuating the horror of *that* particular practice are largely out of commission now (and were for the bulk of Jackson's lifetime). Yet a certain element of arbitrariness to the act is relevant to my purposes with the added caveat that if we insist on an overlap between nineteenth-century lynching and Jackson's unyielding ability to land himself at the center of one scandal after another, then we must also recognize that the victimization of Jackson occurred in far *less* arbitrary a fashion than that of his predecessors.[4] One could argue that Jackson was less "lynched" than afforded the same celebrity scrutiny familiar to all of America's superstars.

John Pittman writing about Nietzschean *ressentiment* applies the famous German's discussion to nineteenth-century lynch law. Pittman tells us that Nietzsche's traditional account of *ressentiment* describes either the ascetic's rage turned inward or a slave revolt directed outward against a perceived "master race" (46). Polarized camps square off in Nietzsche's depiction of resentment, where the most virulent haters are not the masses below but the middlemen, the "priestly caste" which manipulates the bottom feeders into a collective orgy of hate against the "knightly aristocratic" class, the "warrior caste" which "[has] as their presupposition a powerful physicality, a blossoming, rich, even overflowing health, together with that which is required for its preservation: war, adventure, the hunt, dance, athletic contests, and in general everything which includes strong, free, cheerful-hearted activity" (Nietzsche 16). Lynching, in contradistinction, requires focusing the mob's collective wrath away from *both* the perceived "slaves" in the exchange (who, Pittman reminds us, are the white wage-earners, and not, say, black slaves) and their masters (those further along in an established social hierarchy marked by "undirected social forces [of] modernization, industrialization ... [and] wage labor") (Pittman 44). What distinguishes lynch mobs from traditional "slave revolts" is that the collective rage is neither directed inward against the self nor outward against perceived oppressors but onto a "vulnerable individual, a member of the social stratum distinct from both that of the slave-subjects themselves and from their masters" (46).

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Here we have an opportunity to ask ourselves, honestly, how vulnerable—in a sense, how innocent—we perceive Jackson to be. Childhood aside, I would answer, not very. Jackson did not find himself in the central agon because the fates turned on him; rather, he dared to occupy the center, a source of both pride and resentment (for us and him). Where Pittman's analysis takes hold is in his formulation that

> the institution of lynch law had a mechanism of self-justification .... This manifest form [of *ressentiment*] expressed the fears and anxieties of the lynch party that ... faced a population of recently liberated ex-slaves. This population, reduced to peonage and a second slavery ... represented a deep structural challenge to the security of the white wage worker. ... In addition, then, to the structural-economic danger that the ex-slave population posed for the white masses, they represented a further threat not to their economic well-being but to the very paternalist ideology of white womanhood that constituted part of the imaginary identity of interests shoring up the deeply divided white community itself ... [bringing] with it the implicit recognition that consensual sexual activity between members of distinct racial groups implied the basic equality of all humans as such. (Pittman 47–48)

Striving for equality could be a source of pride only for those who valued its achievement as congruent with "structural-economic" advancement. Yet redefining the economic status quo necessarily calls into question a cultural status quo where our very identities are at stake. The "sexual" consideration noted above is simply the most explicit when aligning economic equality with racial equality. I am not suggesting that *all* whites are out to punish blacks for such transgression, merely that such transgression undermines or redefines what it means to be "white" in the first place. Furthermore, Jackson's primary transgression was not an economic one, but a cultural one. Anyone, black or white, watching Jackson climb to the stratospheric heights he did as an entertainer was destined to feel a mix of both pride and scorn: Pride in the sense that Jackson was clearly the (only) one to answer or respond to a cultural legacy left by Fred Astaire; scorn in that, by assuming the cultural center as convincingly as he did, he necessarily called into question the make-up of the cultural scene and our identities on it.

The center-periphery heuristic of note belongs to Eric Gans, whose metaphysical and conceptually circular "scene of representation" houses human resentments at certain categorical points in its make-up. The heuristic is particularly useful in allowing us to locate, more concretely, the forces of culture and resentment at work not only on Jackson, but on *any* object (human or otherwise) worthy of significance. In Gans's anthropology, whoever or whatever occupies central status in the imagination of the human community is subject to both the awe and the scorn of its members. However straightforward this seems, the sophistication of Gans's theory is evident in his discussion of Nietzschean *ressentiment*. As Gans notes, the shortcoming of Nietzsche's take is in his assumption that the "Christian priests," who turn the unassuming mob's attention toward the inherently superior "noble pagan warrior," are motivated by the "sterile hatred" to which the noble pagan warrior is himself

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oblivious. In this incomplete picture of *ressentiment*, the noble pagan warrior is never motivated by *his* hatred—say, of those he subjugates.[5]

Is Jackson a Christian priest at the periphery or a noble pagan warrior at the center? If the former, can we imagine him or his art arising out of a "sterile hatred" for his superiors? If the latter, does his art entail the subjugation of others while inviting scorn? As we will see, these questions are ultimately circular and unanswerable. Though the level of scorn heaped upon Jackson at times seems limitless, the fact that he was black, hence restricted from the center in a certain sense, could only add to *his* resentment.[6] What I am interested in is the two-way interpretation of resentment, mostly with Jackson at the center and an adoring public at the periphery—though the oscillation between peripheral and central perception is more important than the definitive placement of Jackson at either center or periphery. However much we believe Jackson was unfairly targeted or scapegoated in life, he too was capable of lashing out. His rise to fame was not merely auspicious; he fought to achieve the status he did. Such back-and-forth calls for aesthetic/ethical consideration. The ramifications matter.

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Ordinary Achievements

Stanley Cavell's discussion of Fred Astaire appears in the first and third chapters of his book of essays called *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*. The book's title, taken from Nietzsche's preface to *Human, All Too Human*, is an allusion to the "philosopher of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow" upon whom, Cavell reminds us, a "knowledge of the conditions of culture" is contingent (*Philosophy* 116). Cavell's central purpose in the book (and, indeed, throughout his writing career) is to make a case for what he calls "the ordinary"—those moments of subjective experience to which we find ourselves "dead," which explicitly echoes Emerson's notion of "conformity"[7] and from which Cavell calls on the philosopher to liberate us.[8]

In discussing a rather trivial Fred Astaire routine as "something out of the ordinary" (*Philosophy* 7), Cavell does adorn Astaire (in a sense) with the title of philosopher. Astaire, that is, by awakening us to the ordinary through dance, creates the cultural space for a certain type of dialogue to happen, which verges on the creation of language, i.e. upon philosophical territory at best, or, at least, territory worthy of philosophical interest. Coupled with the authority and stature that only a man of his talents could carry, Astaire presents us with an opportunity to consider the stakes in a seemingly trivial dance routine featured for no more than ten minutes in the opening scenes of a 1950s American musical comedy. Astaire, a man blessed with the talents and abilities to warrant the title of a cultural master (if less a fully formed philosopher for the day after tomorrow), has Cavell point to this moment of significance:

> Let's begin uncontroversially. From a baggage cart to a gate, the camera leads the man [Fred Astaire] down the length of a train platform in one continuous shot; at the end of the singing, the camera stops as he does and then, as it were, watches him leave through the gate; we then cut to a view from within the station and see the

> man continue his walk toward us, humming the same tune, then pause, and shift nervously, as if expecting someone. . . .
>
> Overall it seems as nearly uneventful as a photographed song can be. Astaire had begun singing with a little self-conscious laugh, magnified by its producing a palpable cloud of cigarette smoke. It is a self-reflexive response to the fact that in him thinking is about to become singing. (Cavell, *Philosophy* 22; see the sequence online, Rhie, "Astaire")

Cavell reads this sequence as Tony Hunter (Astaire) attempting to "find his feet," neither walking nor dancing but occupying an intermediate zone in which "narratively, he is hoping to cheer himself, letting his body . . . tell him what his emotion is" (23). The cause of his melancholy is never explicitly disclosed. The film suggests that Tony Hunter is lamenting his ignoble return to the New York stage after his career in Hollywood has turned sour.

Here a discussion of the *Billie Jean* video is pertinent, for in it Michael Jackson does a fair bit of walking. In fact, everything Jackson comes in contact with glows a phosphorescent white. When his shoes (which he shines with a tiger-striped rag) hit the pavement, we are anxious to see if the world will keep step with him, mirroring the anxiety Cavell feels at Astaire's both singing-and-not-singing, his neither dance-nor-walk, which elicits in Cavell "a sense of emotional hovering, not so much a feeling of suspense as one of being in suspension" (22). Yet to see this walk (Jackson's walk) as reflective of Astaire's original convalescence invites two responses. First, in *Billie Jean* the camera routinely focuses, squarely, on Jackson's feet. In *The Band Wagon*, Cavell reminds us that Astaire's proto-dance "is framed in such a way that we never see Astaire's feet" (25). Second, if Astaire eventually finds his feet, so that his proto-walk makes it all the way and becomes dance, we can only wonder if Jackson *ever* achieves this in *Billie Jean*. Whatever dance he manages to achieve is solitary. If *Billie Jean* and *Smooth Criminal* are drawing from *The Band Wagon*, then *Billie Jean* in its entirety signifies Jackson's convalescence. So while Cavell takes Astaire to be clearly not-walking, we cannot say that Jackson is doing anything *but* walking in *Billie Jean*. This signifies Astaire, at the tail-end of his career, looking to see if the world will accommodate him, wondering if he is (still) worthy of the world's attention; Jackson, on the other hand, at the beginning of his (solo) career, is doing something on the reverse end of the performative spectrum in wondering if the world is worth engaging with, which means that we are hoping *he* will accommodate *us*.

In *Billie Jean*, Jackson is forlorn, perhaps made weary by false allegations against him. So Billie Jean is, in effect, an allegation or source of an allegation and not a person. Yet the mention of "forty days and forty nights" raises the possibility of Billie Jean as temptation, or temptress; Jackson does indeed say she is "just a girl." But, even so, we never *see* the girl. Billie Jean is a specter or possibility of a girl gone wrong, one who haunts Jackson's perception of the world precisely through false language rather than appearance. If "Billie Jean" is about betrayal, the track and its vocals more intimately express an anguish linked to a betrayal by language rather than by a person.

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The child/son mentioned in the song, whom no one sees also, is fabricated into existence. His existence is made *possible* merely through allegation.

On Jackson's tail is further cause for discontent—a reporter or detective working undercover to inflate the worth of such allegations until the possibility of redress is out of reach. If Jackson is to find his feet, he must do so not by eradicating the inflated language of this world, but in spite of it (in a sense next to, or beside, it). When he finally does begin his dance—alone, in the round, adjacent to the billboards upon which the silk-screened visages of beauty queens appear—his face betrays a grave sense of concentration. Something is on his mind. Must he respond to such allegations or take (greater) pains to mitigate them? What Jackson is skeptical of is the power of his particular expression to allow him to thrive as something other than a cultural slave or performer. He may be only fodder for mass speculation. If finding one's feet entails returning words to their original habitat, away from inflated expectation or meaning, then the line to be drawn is between a yet-to-be (publicly) acknowledged private expression and its possible public disapproval.

How to go on in a world that refuses to praise us, or, perhaps worse, praises us the wrong way (that is, over-praises us)? The question which follows menacingly for the popular (African) American performer, who insists on turning words against words (or dance against the *demand* to dance), is *am I expressing ingratitude toward my country?* Americans, Cavell notes, "come from a country in which an artist's lethal treatment is more apt to be achieved through indifference, or perhaps through an underestimation masked by over-advertising and hyper-praise" (*Philosophy* 68). At the time this video was shot, Jackson's cultural worth to the society that bred him was no longer in doubt. He had been a star for the better part of twenty years and was old enough to know that any legacy worth cultivating would be tied to his ability to transform, rather than conform to, his cultural landscape.

Perhaps visual clues— like the shot of Fred Astaire grabbing the tiger striped rag in *The Band Wagon*, read against, or in conversation with, a shot of the reporter (in *Billie Jean*) grabbing the tiger striped shoeshine rag— are not enough to tie what Jackson is doing in the time before *Smooth Criminal* to what Astaire is doing in the time before *Billie Jean*. This simply because to be aware of the commercial realities surrounding any such production is to know that, quite often, the conventional constraints of the popular music video more readily accommodate only fleeting homages and kitschy cultural references. Yet these images may be enough only because to avoid talking about *Billie Jean* and *Smooth Criminal* against their popular precursors would be to suggest that *The Band Wagon* had *nothing at all* to do with even the most superficial (say prop and costume) choices of these two music videos. Even if we refuse to say such a thing, can we then move from a superficial consideration of stage props to a more serious consideration of intentions—artistic or otherwise? Cavell provides some guidance:

> I have rather assumed, more or less without argument . . . that Kant's location of the aesthetic judgment, as claiming to record the presence of pleasure without a concept, makes room for a particular form of criticism, one capable of supplying

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> the concepts which, after the fact of pleasure, articulate the grounds of this experience in particular objects. The work of such criticism is to reveal its object as having yet to achieve its due effect. Something there, despite being fully open to the senses, has been missed. I . . . claim that while it is not a fact that the Astaire routine is trivial, the sequence can be seen to be about triviality; and to show that will require showing how its pleasure derives from its location of formal conditions of its art. (Cavell, *Philosophy* 11)

Our lack of concepts for describing the nature of the exchange between Fred Astaire and Michael Jackson is to be overturned not by fashioning new words from our everyday existence but by allowing whatever we might take to be (visually) trivial (i.e. a tiger-striped rag) to carry the significance and speak for, or as props to, the philosophical ground between these two performers. If we take the rag in *Billie Jean* to be as trivial here as in the Astaire number, then we *have* stumbled upon a meeting place of sorts, where both routines are, at the very least, making competing claims about triviality—say, the triviality of performance. Hence my suggestion that Cavell's critical effort, which buttresses the significance of an ordinary Fred Astaire routine by nothing more than the formal condition of its triviality, is only the beginning of a conversation that begins with *The Band Wagon* and ends (for now) with Michael Jackson's *Smooth Criminal*.

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Fred Astaire's Claim to Knowledge

Setting the stage for *Smooth Criminal* requires focusing on the second of Cavell's two Fred Astaire sequences, the one where Cavell isolates what he calls Astaire's "dance of praise" from his "dance of madness" (69). (The demarcation comes when Astaire begins his frenetic refrain: "I gotta shine on my shoes, I gotta shine on my shoes, I gotta shine on my shoes"—see the sequence online: Rhie, "Cavell"). The change in Tony Hunter's mood is characterized by a change in tempo. For Cavell, reading frenzy as *following* praise saves the integrity of the performance. While the display of a white man receiving a shoeshine from a black man could signify, in certain interpretive circles, the appropriation of the latter's abilities and talents by the former,[9] Cavell takes pains to remind us that the exchange ought not to signify the collapse of the cultural scene to a point where neither the shoeshine man nor the performer can go on. The point is to resolve the issue at hand, which requires acknowledging the stakes before both men:

> Astaire's dance of praise is itself to be understood specifically as about this painful and potentially deadly irony of the white praise of a black culture whose very terms of praise it has appropriated, even climactically about being brushed with madness in one's participation in it. A dance of praise which incorporates a dance of madness may be expected to have something to teach about both dance and praise. (Cavell 69)

The ramifications of this ordinary sequence in an extraordinary narrative, of black-white relations in America, of appropriation and victimhood, and of resolving differences are not articulated in haste by Cavell, which is to say they are hardly, if only mutedly, articulated at all. Though culture may draw from legislation designed to stymie the moral hypocrisy latent in our everyday relations to one another, change in our interpersonal

relations requires mutual acts of negotiation, recognition, and acknowledgment, which is less a claim to knowledge than "an interpretation of it" (Cavell, *Quest* 3), the sort of knowledge that calls attention to the cultural space between center and periphery without necessarily (or immediately) transforming the make-up of the scene or the position of the players on it. Hence the veritable limits of language (or dance).

That Fred Astaire "asserts the right to praise" (Cavell, *Philosophy* 61) can be taken as brazen, yet his actions do not so much silence the black shoeshine man as initiate a conversation; though their relationship is not yet symmetrical, the stage has been set and the possibility for redress left open. The piece's integrity is further evident in the way it chooses to end:

> [There] is—if again perhaps only after the fact, but then traumatically—a moment of sharp and unexpected poignancy. Is it entirely derived from the recognition that, after what these two have accomplished together, the black man is left on his knees, having returned the hat and whisked the white man's suit and accepted a handshake and a tip from him as he leaves to cash in on his comeback?
>
> . . . . Astaire has shown the acknowledgment of his debt in a way that has required a lifetime of faithfulness to achieve. Nobody does what Astaire does better than Astaire does it. It is in its transcendent accomplishment that it claims the standing to pay homage to the transcendent accomplishment of black dancing. It hurts that his work changes nothing in the conditions of injustice under which the debt has been incurred. But what hurts unnecessarily, what contributes to a frenzy of hurt, a dance of frenzy, is the denial of the claim Astaire's expression has achieved, the claim that the conditions of the dance are part of the dance, that the pain of this leave-taking haunts the pleasure of its accompaniment, that not to recognize the pain is to deny that it is a call for change, that the homage has itself constituted a step of change, in a world with such a problem in it. (Cavell 77–78)

That Astaire has *earned* the position he has, that he has established himself to have standing with the black shoeshine man, could have come only through gargantuan efforts and talents. The ethical work carried out here is contingent on ability, on Astaire being the one on whom the future of black-white relations in America depends. Yet the claim to hero worship is dissolved by the manner in which Astaire chooses to express his gratitude—not by acting/performing on stage, but by taking up his chance in an ordinary time and place (a nondescript arcade) wherein he must find his feet while making a stab at redress.

If Astaire has set up the conditions for a future black dancer to take up his legacy, to begin the redress the shoeshine man could not, and if only one of gargantuan talents and abilities would suffice in commanding the same sort of standing as Astaire in popular imagination, it is difficult to think of another human being worthy of the task than Michael Jackson. Astaire says as much in his hefty praise of Jackson, calling him "one hell of a dancer."[10] Yet he also notes that Jackson is "an angry dancer."[11] Because Astaire leaves the opportunity for redress open, we must note how or in what sense Jackson takes up the call and whether or not he affords anyone else the opportunity to respond in kind.

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Michael Jackson's Extraordinary Acknowledgment

In *Smooth Criminal*, we first see Michael silhouetted at the far end of an alleyway; after he adjusts his lapels and hat, we see him run toward us as he arrives at the night club entrance. Three children peer over a fence at him. He opens the door and is blasted by a gust of wind. He stares it down, adjusts his fedora and enters. The door closes behind him. It is silent. He is eyed meticulously by several characters, including a woman behind a fan, a man behind a green chemical tank, a man in the rafters, and two men who whisper to one another: "Watch him!" Michael swiftly makes for his weapon. The tension rises. Instead of pulling out a gun, a coin appears in his hand from, we can only assume, his right hip pocket. With the flick of his thumb, he sends it sailing across the room. The coin spins in the air with a rhythmic pulse before flying into the slot of the jukebox. The jukebox activates; the music and dance are under way.

Note there is also a coin in *Billie Jean*. A coin actually precedes Jackson's entrance into the video, so the coin, as a form of payment, comes before anything happens, as though for anything *to happen* requires a certain squaring away of debts. So let us read the coin—as a form of payment, i.e. the beginning of a transaction—as beginning in *Billie Jean* and ending in *Smooth Criminal*. Beginning (not ending) in *Billie Jean* because, when Jackson tosses the coin in this video, he initially misses the mark, but ending in *Smooth Criminal* because in this video he all too sleekly *nails* it.

We have to ask about the significance of his initial miss in *Billie Jean*. The video carries on as it should. The coin, despite clinking off the rim, eventually finds its way to the bottom of the cup, which subsequently lights up as does the homeless man to whom the coin is to go. Yet Jackson never touches the man's body, so the only way the coin could get to him to effect the change it does is if it were eaten. We can imagine the homeless man spending the coin on bread, in effect buying something to eat. Yet as a stand-in for the communion wafer (taken into the body as a sign of the body), a coin reduces the redemption of a person to something no longer spiritual/aesthetic but economic. Salvation comes not in giving bread but in giving money, which is to say that one's sustenance in this particular universe is based on money and not food. We never see the man eat, but his recovery translates into the donning of an exquisite white tuxedo, the sort one wears in times of celebration, when the feast is fat.

Is Jackson pitying or praising this homeless man? Offering up a benediction unprompted, when the benefactor is not asked to reply in return, suggests that the man is deserving of such acknowledgement, of this praise before Jackson can go on. Why, then, is this man depicted as homeless, on the opposite and unflattering end of a life not of fame, but of dignity? We must remember that dignity in this universe is tied to significance rather than (biological) sustenance. It is not bread he must eat but bread he must wear (i.e. perform). The white attire and garb donned here by the man whom America has abandoned is later donned by Michael Jackson in *Smooth Criminal*, in homage to Fred Astaire.[12]

Then is it too much to say that the homeless man on the street *is* Fred Astaire? Such an outrageous conclusion is not any less a reason to make the claim; on the contrary,

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that we often forget to consider Michael Jackson against his popular predecessor tells us that the road to immortality is indeed fraught with peril if and when the dancer once held in popular esteem is replaced. What token does the new popular dancer owe the old? What gesture made toward a predecessor is registered at all in the arena of popular taste? If you answer, "Hardly any!" acknowledging that such a gesture is destined to be lost on the masses, hence made gratuitously, then you are making the case that this figure ought to be read as Fred Astaire, the popular figure abandoned by an America whose "lethal" treatment of its celebrities is clearly on the mind of Michael Jackson in *Billie Jean*. Jackson less pities this figure than salutes him, understanding his gesture is likely to be lost on those to whom he too must ultimately answer.

In *Billie Jean*, Jackson is searching to "find his feet," as though seeking to get some economic/cultural transaction under way while acknowledging the burden of centrality. By the time of *Smooth Criminal*, however, he has found his feet and takes up the center resolutely. The question to be asked is whether or not he has earned the right to end the transaction.

From the very beginning of *Smooth Criminal,* everyone in the club is aware that Michael is the master of dance. Only upon his cue, for instance, does the music begin. The look of grave concentration shown in *Billie Jean* has vanished. This video never questions or calls into doubt his mastery. Michael does not search for moves; instead, he dances flawlessly through a warehouse filled with criminals. Never is Michael in any significant danger. At one point he is egged on by a scary looking thug who busts a pool cue over his leg. Yet after crushing the thug's cue ball in his hand, Michael spins up to him, blows the remainder of the ball (now dust) into his face and proceeds to spin away from him and up the stairs. The man is so mesmerized he cannot retaliate. Later, a man with a dagger approaches Michael from behind. Without turning to face him, Michael pulls a revolver out of his vest pocket, points it backwards, and annihilates him. Michael is invincible.

Later, when the song and dance break and the cat walks across the piano in the video's eerie Dionysian interlude, we understand the surrounding chorus wants to devour Michael, or divvy him up, as a form of payment or sacrifice. Yet an aura surrounds him. He effortlessly eludes encroaching resentments. The music and chants undulate, but Michael calmly defuses the possibility of violence. In the two other long music videos, *Bad* and *Thriller*, the resumption of events after a break in proceedings marks a significant (i.e. visibly apparent) physical transformation which eventually prompts reconciliation. Yet when Michael works the crowd up to a frenzy for the last time, calling out loudly for the music and dance to resume ("Annie are you okay!"), what follows could only be anticlimactic—burdened, that is, with the narrative duty of building toward a suitable crescendo *again*. When the music and dance resume in *Smooth Criminal,* Michael is his same old self, dressed in the same clothes, calling out for the same girl, armed with the same moves. The sameness of things after the break suggests that *Smooth Criminal* is a video that works up to several climaxes, each one petering out as a sort of anti-climax. The extended dance sequence and enlivened tempo that follows serve only to mark the failure of the video's final climax. By the end

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of the video, that is, Michael unequivocally takes up the center; he has won the admiration of the criminals once antagonistic to him and they proceed to encircle him, no longer to devour, but to join him in dance. Yet there remain those at the periphery still immune to his power. As Mr Big's (Joe Pesci's) goons infiltrate the nightclub and surround Michael, he responds not by dancing out of harm's way but by, quite dramatically, taking aim and blasting away with his Tommy gun—the most explicit rendering of his *ressentiment* to date. He then proceeds to run out of *Club 30s* and the video (the song and dance portion anyhow) ends.

The sloppiness of this final sequence, as substitute for a sort of *deus ex machina* lacking in a hastily conceived gangster narrative, may undermine any attempt at reading this act of transgression as truly pregnant with significance. The noted Euripidean convention, usually involving a ghost or spirit descending from the heavens, is used when the horizontal plane of human resentments can be untangled only by otherworldly forces. We can speculate that surrounded as he is, Michael, in the spirit of a deity, *could* have spirited himself away from trouble. The other option would have been, perhaps, to fall through a trap door. But forgoing any sort of vertical transcendence, Michael instead makes his "peace" not by leaving room for redress but by lashing out violently. Taking square aim at his enemies, he is no longer interested in transcendence, as though the opportunity to undergo the type of redemptive transformation we expect has been missed, or abandoned entirely.

The question then arises of who is justified in their rage, those who intrude upon the scene from the periphery or those who dare to occupy the center. Yet Jackson, or anyone for that matter, can hardly be placed neatly at the center or periphery of our cultural imagination. As Gans suggests, the work of culture happens in the *oscillation* between center and periphery, which guarantees not the vanquishing of one side or the other but the perpetual deferral of resentments at both sides. Cavell might characterize such oscillation as negotiation, the sort through which human acknowledgment occurs. In order to judge the ground of conversation adequately, the nature of such oscillation requires careful consideration. I cannot be the first to have felt that Jackson was excoriated in life not because of any particular criminal transgression but because of a cultural one—having dared to vie for the center and occupy it as convincingly as he did. Hence the persecution of Jackson, while alarmingly arbitrary in the *criminal* sense, is not quite congruent with the most extreme form of *arbitrary* persecution (i.e. lynching). One could make the case that Jackson was made an example of, that the courts in America are capable of punishing America's cultural transgressors, which does not exactly mean they follow up on arbitrary charges, though, at times, they do not exactly follow up on criminal charges either.

Yet a question remains. What sort of acknowledgement does Michael Jackson afford Fred Astaire? I have tried to make the case that the sort of transformation Jackson undergoes over the course of two videos mirrors—which means he is responding to—the sort Astaire undergoes in one segment of one film of the 1950s. By the end of *Billie Jean*, a way forward is not clear; we are left hanging, which leaves room for, or demands, further conversation. If we are similarly left hanging after the opening sequence of *The*

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Band Wagon, we take comfort knowing that Astaire has done his part, has said all he can say. At the end of *Billie Jean*, we can only wonder if Jackson can do or say more. He does indeed say more in *Smooth Criminal*, ultimately lashing out instead of leaving room, so that ordinary dance becomes extraordinary resentment. The work for us is to ask whether we can accommodate such resentment in what we take art or expression to be, whether the burden of the center as Jackson perceived it is worthy of such outlandishness, whether we on the periphery can weather such chastisement or whether Jackson, from the unique and awe-inspiring position he has achieved as an entertainer, is telling us about something we are otherwise not likely to acknowledge: black anger.

Notes

[1] For the latest and most telling example of the sort of insidious but "heartfelt" victimization of Michael Jackson, see Montreal journalist Ian Halperin. Halperin's name rose to prominence when, in December 2008, he famously predicted that Jackson had six months to live. Almost six months to the day, Jackson did indeed pass away. In the aftermath, Halperin's book went speedily into print and was dedicated, somewhat crassly, to "Michael's fans" and "his three children."

At risk of sounding cynical, the obvious marketing ploy, to my mind, was to promote yet another victimary angle capable of "explaining" Jackson's eccentricities. Perhaps his eccentricities require explanation, but, for those who insist on loving Jackson at all costs, anyone willing to provide a *novel* and sympathetic sob story stands to profit. With other victimary narratives largely exhausted (i.e. the "have you seen my childhood" angle, or the "abusive father" angle, or the "child star" angle), Halperin went to some lengths to give his particular hypothesis credibility. Though he ultimately suggests that Jackson was manipulated by those around him, Halperin covertly puts forward new victimary "possibilities," including Jackson's alleged "homosexuality" and prescription "drug problem." These new narratives, like all the others, provide only a piece of the puzzle, and, in the end, serve to explain nothing. If we take the aggregate of all of Jackson's supposed shortcomings, we are left, finally, not with an explanation, but still *begging* for an explanation.

On the other end of the spectrum, though I am unaware of any credible, *overtly* one-sided condemnations of Michael Jackson, certainly tabloid sources are relentless. For a detailed account of the disturbing prosecutorial bloodlust of Santa Barbara District Attorney Thomas Sneddon Jr., see Jones; Jefferson (106–38).

[2] For instance, John Jeremiah Sullivan writes: "It's fascinating to read the interviews he gave to *Ebony* and *Jet* over the past thirty years. . . . During whole stretches of years when the big media were reporting endlessly on his bizarreness and reclusiveness, he was every so often granting these intimate and illuminating sit-downs to those magazines . . . to hear Michael laid-back and talking unpretentiously about art, the thing he most loved—that is a new Michael, a person utterly absent from, for example, Martin Bashir's infamous documentary. . . . He is charming; his mind is alive. What a pleasure to find him listening to early "writing version" demos of his own compositions and saying, 'Listen to that, that's at home, Janet, Randy, me. . . . You're hearing four basses on there."

[3] "Yes, [Michael] says, he feels used, declining specifics, saying only that in his profession, 'They demand that, and they want you to do this. They think that they own you, they think they *made* you. If you don't have faith, you go crazy'" (Hershey 60).

[4] The idea of "black" success in popular culture as the sort that truly remedies the status quo or merely perpetuates existing racial hierarchies is taken up more fervently by Ellis Cashmore. His critique of the commodification of black culture is pertinent for anyone wanting to sus out how or if Jackson's commercial successes really constituted social change. Cashmore takes up the case of Jackson in his chapter 9, entitled "Infant Icon," and indeed employs the term "lynching" (see Cashmore 125–43).

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[5] See the first and third essays in Nietzsche (9–34, 67–118). As Gans puts it, "Nietzsche might well have admired [noble pagan warrior] Achilles, but he would not have called it resentment. My insistence on the term is not, however, an arbitrary matter of definition. The point is that there is no fundamental distinction between the resentment of Nietzsche's priests ... on the one hand and that of ... Achilles on the other. ... The political history of our nearly completed century is demonstration enough that fundamental human equality must be pushed back one more level than Nietzsche's anti-Christian critique allowed it. Separating people into the heroic and the resentful, the authentic and the inauthentic, is a prelude to genocide" (see Gans, "Chronicle #160"; *Originary Thinking* 1–28).

[6] The salient example from life would be Jackson's purchase of the Beatles' catalogue. At first glance, the "business" motives behind the acquisition seem sound enough. Such sentiment very quickly seems short-sighted and naïve, however. The significance of the act, though more readily described in dollar figures, went far beyond any straightforward economic calculation. Though Jackson is understandably coy about the affair in his autobiography (see Jackson 194), no shortage of pundits have voiced the move's obvious cultural resonance. *Rolling Stone* contributor Touré cuts right to the chase: "It proved his savvy, separating him from all those previous black artists who lacked the power to control the music business. But, more than that, the symbolic power of Jackson owning the Beatles' music cannot be overstated. Not only did he become as big as the Beatles, he *bought* them too. A century after American whites owned blacks, a black performer owned the product of the most elite white group in the world. It was an amazing turn about, and one blacks took special pride in" (73).

[7] Emerson makes much of conformity in his essay on "Self-Reliance," but the quotation with the greatest semantic weight (for Cavell) is, I believe, this one. "The virtue in most request in conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion." See Emerson 17. For a discussion of how Cavell reads this quotation, see Cavell, *Cities* 19-22.

[8] For a terrific primer on just how Stanley Cavell seeks to employ "the common, the familiar, and the low," in true Emersonian spirit and in his subsequent discussion of the philosophical significance of film, see Cavell (*Pursuits* 1–42).

[9] This is the position taken up by Robert Gooding-Williams *after* acknowledging Cavell's interpretation of events. Rather than seeing room for praise, Gooding-Williams is instead "dismayed" by the Astaire routines. Though he launches a very interesting discussion that "racializes" the skepticism Cavell discusses—where a "white" melancholy is tied to a white emasculation which requires inheriting what Eric Lott calls the "cool, virility, abandon or *gaité de Cour* that were the prime components of white ideologies of black manhood" (Lott, qtd in Gooding-Williams)—he insists, even "demands," that his dismay "prompt dismay in others." One reason to avoid explicit discussion of Gooding-Williams in this paper is because the dismay he expresses is an invitation (or a "demand") to end conversation rather than extend it. Michael Jackson was certainly not "dismayed" by the opening scenes of *The Band Wagon*, though he did choose to respond to them in a way that arguably acknowledges (if less fully agrees with) Gooding-Williams's denial of the film's "appropriateness." See Gooding-Williams (254, 259); also, for a rejoinder to Gooding-Williams, see Rhu (197–210).

[10] This is recounted to J. R. Taraborrelli by Hermes Pan, the "legendary choreographer and Oscar winner who taught Fred and Ginger Rogers their most memorable dance steps" (242–43).

[11] The full quotation by Fred Astaire: "You're an angry dancer. I'm the same way. I used to do the same thing with my cane" (qtd in Tick and Beaudoin 820–21). In his autobiography, Michael Jackson recounts their meeting after his *Motown 25* performance of "Billie Jean" in 1983. He recalls that Astaire praised him to the point where Jackson "really blushed" (see *Moonwalk* 209–10).

[12] I should clarify that Fred Astaire's white suit is not the one that appears in the opening sequences of *The Band Wagon* but is, rather, donned by Astaire in its last sequence, "The Girl Hunt Ballet."

[13] One that requires interpretation of the sort more penetrating than that found in the commemorative issue of *Rolling Stone*, which somewhat blithely dismisses the sequence as "interpretive dance." We all know it is interpretive; the question is *interpretive of what?* (see Sheffield 79).

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